SPORT

Third time lucky as Poland beat Switzerland to clinch United Cup

SYDNEY: Poland players pose with the trophy after defeating Switzerland in the United Cup final on Sunday.—AFP

SYDNEY: Poland battled past Switzerland 2-1 in the United Cup final on Sunday to banish the pain of title-round defeats in the previous two editions and secure a long-awaited maiden triumph in the season-opening mixed-team competition.

Hubert Hurkacz continued his resurgence in his first event back after a near seven-month injury layoff by beating veteran Stan Wawrinka 6-3, 3-6, 6-3 to level the tie at 1-1 after Iga Swiatek lost 3-6, 6-0, 6-3 to an inspired Belinda Bencic.

The mixed doubles duo of Katarzyna Kawa and Jan Zielinski then downed Bencic and Jakub Paul 6-4, 6-3 in the deciding match to trigger jubilant scenes in Sydney, where Poland finally converted their dominance into silverware.

"We've finally made it. Third time lucky," Swiatek said.

"We worked hard ... I want to thank the team. This year it was such a team effort, I really felt the support. Even though my singles performances weren't perfect, you got my spirits up and you all believed until the end."

Bencic won 12 of the final 15 games against a shell-shocked Swiatek, earning her second victory over the world number two.

"To be honest, I felt I was in the match from the very first point," said Bencic, who won all five of her singles matches in the tournament.

"I thought I was going great and I was 0-3 down. I was 'OK, what do I have to do?' "I think I just tried to keep the level and just wait for some chances."

Victory capped a superb campaign for Poland, who beat last year's champions the United States in the semi-finals, and set up Hurkacz to carry momentum into his singles campaign at the Australian Open that begins on Jan 18.Playing in his final season on tour, Wawrinka pushed Hurkacz hard to force a deciding set in the second singles encounter but the 40-year-old was unable to grab the victory that would have clinched the tie.

"He's definitely an inspiration," Hurkacz said about the three-times major champion.

"I grew up watching him play, compete and win so much. His game style is really powerful. The shots he pulls off sometimes, you can really admire them even when you are on the other side of the net."

Hurkacz was equally impressive on the day, sending down 18 aces and saving eight out of the nine break points he faced in the match to set up the decider, where the experience of Kawa and Zielinski helped Poland prevail.—Agencies

Sabalenka downs Kostyuk to claim Brisbane crown

ARYNA Sabalenka poses with the Brisbane International Trophy after beating Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk in the final at Pat Rafter Arena on Sunday.—Reuters

BRISBANE: World number one Aryna Sabalenka warmed up for a tilt at a third Australian open title in four years in ominous fashion by winning her second successive Brisbane International crown on Sunday.

Sabalenka scored a dominant 6-4, 6-3 win over Marta Kostyuk in just 78 minutes.

"Every day you go out there and prove your level, and I think this week I did it really well," said Sabalenka after a tournament in which she powered to the title without dropping a set.

Looking ahead to the Australian Open, which begins next Sunday, Sabalenka said: "The only thing I know is that I'll be there, I'll be fighting."

Salablenka lost in the Melbourne Park final last year to Madison Keys, having been Australian Open champion in 2023 and 2024.

"I'll do my best to go as far as possible," said Sabalenka. "And do a little bit better than last year. That's my focus."

Kostyuk, the world number 26, had enjoyed a spectacular week, beating three top 10 players on the way to the final.

But she had no answer to the power of Sabalenka and the Ukrainian's serve, so reliable in the early rounds, also went off the boil.

Sabalenka was rarely troubled on her own delivery and faced only three break points.

The 27-year-old Belarusian said she had tried to introduce new elements to her game so she wasn't relying just on power, and that had paid off this week.

"I finally found the touch game," she said."I figured something and I kind of changed my game style — now I'm not only the aggressive player, I can play at the net, I can be in defence, I can use my slice, I have a good touch.

"I'm super happy to see that things are clicking together."

There has been animosity between the two players in the past.

Like many Ukraine players, Kostyuk refuses to shake hands with Russians or Belarusians because of the war in her homeland.

There was no handshake at the end of the final and in her speech at the trophy presentation, Kostyuk brought up the situation in Ukraine.

"I play every day with a pain in my heart and there are thousands of people who are without light and warm water right now," she said.

"It's minus 20 degrees outside and it's very painful to live this reality every day."

Sabalenka said she wasn't concerned by Kostyuk's attitude towards her.

"It's their position, what can I do?," she asked. "When I go out there, I think about my tennis and the things I have to do to get the win.

"It doesn't matter if it's Marta Kostyuk or Jessica Pegula there. I have nothing to prove. I go there and I just compete as an athlete."

Kostyuk told reporters she was determined to keep what is happening in Ukraine in the public eye.—AFP

Stuttgart score four past Leverkusen

LEVERKUSEN: VfB Stuttgart fired four goals past hapless hosts Bayer Leverkusen in a lop-sided first half on Saturday to cruise to a 4-1 Bundesliga victory after the three-week winter break.

The visitors completely dismantled Leverkusen in the opening half as Jamie Leweling scored twice before the hosts pulled one back with a 66th-minute Alex Grimaldo penalty.

Stuttgart climbed to 29 points in fifth place, level on points with Leverkusen in fourth and third-placed RB Leipzig, who have a game in hand following the postponement of their match at St Pauli due to snow.Meanwhile, Freiburg came from a goal down to beat Hamburg 2-1 at home, with the visitors playing most of the second half with 10 men.

Tottenham loanee Luka Vuskovic put Hamburg in front just after half-time but Freiburg scored twice through Vincenzo Grifo and Igor Matanovic after Daniel Elfadli picked up a second yellow on the 51st-minute mark.

The victory took Freiburg four points outside the European placings.

In the German capital, last-placed Mainz played out a 2-2 draw against Union Berlin, with visiting coach Urs Fischer managing his first match against his former side.

Mainz are unbeaten in five games in all competitions since Fischer was appointed in early December, including a memorable 2-2 draw at league leaders Bayern Munich.

Elsewhere, Heidenheim picked up a valuable point in a 2-2 home draw with Cologne.—Agencies

Villarreal sink Alaves to stay in La Liga hunt

VILA REAL: Villarreal eased to a 3-1 victory over Deportivo Alaves on Saturday to move clear of Atletico Madrid in third in La Liga and stay in contention to win the Spanish title.

Alberto Moleiro, Gerard Moreno and Georges Mikautadze struck in the second half to cut leaders Barcelona's lead to eight points, having played one fewer game than the Catalan champions.

Villarreal climbed three points ahead of Atletico and within four of second-placed Real Madrid, who have both also played an extra game.

"We hope we're capable of winning [our game in hand] too and adding three more points to this extraordinary first half of the season," Villarreal coach Marcelino Garcia Toral told DAZN.

Alaves kept the hosts at bay comfortably in a first half of few clear chances, but Villarreal stepped up a gear after the interval.

"It's true that in January, I don't know if it's because of the weather making your legs cold and your mind cold, but teams are often inconsistent," said Marcelino.

"In the second half we had put together some superb moves, and we scored three beautiful goals."

The only lapse of the day by Villarreal occurred when Thomas Partey clumsily gave the ball away in front of his area and Toni Martinez rammed home to salvage some pride for Alaves, who are 15th in the table.In Saturday's late match, Valencia rescued a 1-1 draw at home against Elche but their players were booed off after a sixth league game without a win.

Six-time La Liga winners Los Che are down in 18th and coach Carlos Corberan is fighting for his job.

"Another week where it's hard for us to score the chances we make and [opponents] punish us for it," midfielder Pepelu told DAZN.

"It's football, there are dynamics [you get into], they had one shot on target and we had various chances... we know the path we have to follow."

Elsewhere, Girona rose to 12th, four points clear of the drop zone, thanks to Vladyslav Vanat's clever flicked finish which earned them a 1-0 win over Osasuna.

Bottom side Real Oviedo earned a creditable 1-1 draw at home against Real Betis and sit five points from safety.—AFP

PTV, Wapda win as pacers run riot

KARACHI: Pacers ran riot in the President's Trophy as Pakistan Television (PTV) and Wapda won their respective matches of the tournament's third round here on Sunday.

Amad Butt's 6-29 and Musa Khan's hat-trick for 3-10 in the second innings saw PTV down Ghani Glass by 88 runs, while Mohammad Zeeshan's 6-66 led Wapda to an innings and 32-run victory over Sahir Associates.

At the National Bank Stadium, Amad and Musa's exploits decimated Ghani Glass' pursuit of 157 runs to bundle them out for 68 — which featured Noman Ali and Khurram Shahzad's 45-run stand as the only notable act of resistance after the team slipped to 23-7. The last three wickets came in form of Musa's hat-trick.

Earlier, PTV were bowled out for 193 as Mir Hamza took 4-54.

At the UBL Sports Complex, Zeeshan helped Wapda dismiss Sahir Associates for 103 as the latter failed to catch Wapda's first-innings score of 323 despite following on after having posted 103.

Zeeshan collected match figures of 9-89 as his second first-class five-for didn't let Sahir Associates erase the 126-run deficit as they resumed day three with 94-5. Mohammad Adil backed Zeeshan with 3-65 taking his match tally to 7-89.

At the State Bank Stadium, Sui Northern Gas Pipelines needed two wickets, while State Bank of Pakistan required another 54 runs to win as they were 170-8 at close of play after an eventful day.

Chasing 224 for a win, SBP slumped to 125-7 as Abdullah Fazal (41) and Rameez Aziz (29) salvaged their innings, while Qasim Akram took them to close with 33 not out.

Earlier, SBP's Niaz Khan bagged 5-38 as SNGPL were bowled out for just 75. Mohammad Ismail and Mohammad Abbas picked up two wickets each.

Oil and Gas Development Company Limited closed the day three against Khan Research Laboratories with 96-run second innings lead as they were 199-4 with Mohammad Sarwar Afridi unbeaten on 90. KRL's Arshad Iqbal had taken three of the four wickets to fall. Earlier, KRL were dismissed for 347 as OGDCL's skipper Adil returned figures of 3-33.—Sports Reporter

NONTHABURI (Thailand): Pakistan women's futsal team head coach Fatemeh Sharif Noghabi (L) and captain Kaya Bokhari pose with the trophy at the opening press conference for the SAFF Women's Futsal Championship on Sunday. Pakistan open their campaign at the inaugural event against Bhutan on Tuesday before squaring off against Sri Lanka two days later. They next face the Maldives on Jan 17 before clashing with India two days later. Their penultimate match of the round-robin stage, which will have all seven teams playing each other once, sees them face Nepal on Jan 21 and they round off their campaign with a tie against Bangladesh on Jan 23. The table toppers at the end of all seven rounds of matches will be crowned the first-ever SAFF Women's Futsal champions. The men's event will run concurrently with the women's event with South Asia's football governing body hoping the landmark event will be a 'vital step toward nurturing futsal' in the region.—Courtesy SAFF

Lens maintain winning run

PARIS: Ligue 1 leaders RC Lens ploughed to a 3-0 victory at third-tier Sochaux in a snow-delayed round-of-32 French Cup match on Sunday.

In a match postponed from Saturday evening by a blizzard, Lens rested only veteran midfielder Florian Thauvin against opponents who have won the competition twice.

Odsonne Edouard gave Lens a 22nd minute lead but the visitors only locked up a ninth consecutive victory in all competitions with late goals from Matthieu Udol and Abdallah Sima.—AFP

ROME: Roma's Manu Kone celebrates scoring during the Serie A match against Sassuolo at Olympic Stadium.—AFP

Kone, Soule on target as Roma beat Sassuolo

ROME: Late goals by Manu Kone and Matias Soule helped AS Roma secure a hard-fought 2-0 victory at home over Sassuolo on Saturday.

Down to the bare bones due to a clutch of injuries and players away at the Africa Cup of Nations, Roma moved into third thanks to quickfire goals from Kone and Soule which broke Sassuolo's brave resistance.

Kone thumped home the opener with his head from Soule's pinpoint cross in the 77th minute to spark delirium in the Stadio Olimpico.

And fans were sure of the three points for their team two minutes later when Soule calmly rolled home Stephan El Shaarawy's delicate flick at the end of a flowing passing move.

Argentine forward Soule told DAZN he would buy El Shaarawy "a bottle of wine" in front of his grinning veteran teammate who in stoppage time hit the bar and and had a goal ruled out for offside.

"Thankfully the second half was played in a difference spirit to the first, matches get more open as they go on... all we can do is carry on going as we are," said Soule.

Gian Piero Gasperini's team were a completely different proposition in the second half after a drab opening period in which Sassuolo — 12th and 10 points above the relegation zone — held their own.

"There was more intensity in the second half but above all there was more quality," said Gasperini.

"I started seeing what I see in training: good play in tight situations and the ability to create danger in the opposition's area.

"I can only thank the players for their extraordinary commitment and character, but also for their quality."

Meanwhile, Como's hopes of Champions League football were dented slightly by a 1-1 draw with 10-man Bologna.

Martin Baturina's stunning late strike salvaged a point for Como who trailed to a goal from Nicolo Cambiaghi netted shortly after half-time. He was later sent off for violent conduct.

Elsewhere, Atalanta beat Torino 1-0 and continued their climb towards the European places under Raffaele Palladino.—AFP

Egypt dump out holders Ivory Coast as Nigeria set up semi with Morocco

AGADIR: Mohamed Salah scored as Egypt won 3-2 to dump defending champions Ivory Coast out of the Africa Cup of Nations in a thrilling quarter-final on Saturday, while Victor Osimhen starred as Nigeria beat Algeria 2-0 to set up a clash with hosts Morocco.

Omar Marmoush and Ramy Rabia netted for Egypt, then Ahmed Aboul-Fetouh conceded an own goal before half-time.

Salah then edged closer to a first Africa Cup of Nations winners medal by doubling the lead soon after the break before Guela Doue pulled a goal back for Ivory Coast, but it wasn't enough for the holders.

The jubilant Egyptians will face Senegal on Wednesday in Tangiers with the winners meeting hosts Morocco or Nigeria four days later in the final.

"I'm so happy with this win and reaching the semi-finals," said Salah. "I am proud to wear the Egyptian national jersey and all the players know the responsibility that comes with it."

Egypt coach Hossam Hassan thanked his players, calling them "true Egyptians who fight for the happiness of their people".

He added: "The success belongs to the players, starting with Salah and Marmoush, who lead the press from the front. We know there will be spaces, and our players can exploit them."

The triumph in Agadir confirmed Egypt's AFCON dominance over Ivory Coast since they first met 56 years ago. The Pharaohs have won 11 times and the Elephants just once.

Ivory Coast become the eighth consecutive title-holders to fail to successfully defend the title since Egypt achieved the feat in 2010.

Salah has helped Liverpool win the Premier League, FA Cup, League Cup, Champions League and Club World Cup, in its previous format, but the most prized African medal has eluded him.

The 33-year-old has twice been a runner-up after losses in the AFCON final to Cameroon in 2017 and Senegal five years later.

"It was a perfect win, but as I said before, we are fighting for our country," Salah told CAF's media channel. "Hopefully we go through the next game as well, it's against a tough opponent, but we will give our best.

"We are fighting so hard, you can see the players, nobody is holding anything... We are just carrying on," he added.

Salah equalled his manager Hassan's AFCON tally, with each scoring 11 goals. He needs just one more goal to become Egypt's all-time top scorer in the tournament alongside Hassan El-Shazly.

Earlier on Saturday, Osimhen scored one and made another as Nigeria ended Algeria's hopes in the first game of the day in Marrakesh.

Nigeria dominated the first half without scoring before getting the breakthrough within two minutes of the restart as Osimhen headed in a cross from Bruno Onyemaechi.

AGADIR: Egypt's Mohamed Salah scores during the Africa Cup of Nations quarter-final against Ivory Coast at Adrar Stadium.—Reuters

The 2023 African player of the year then turned provider for the second goal just before the hour mark, setting up Akor Adams who rounded the goalkeeper to put the Super Eagles out of sight.

"A very big congratulations to the whole team for the kind of performance they put in against a very good Algeria team," said Osimhen after collecting the man-of-the-match trophy.

"For me I just did my job. I tried to fight for the team and to get goals or assists, but the whole squad deserves praise."

Runners-up at the last AFCON two years ago in Ivory Coast, Nigeria came to Morocco still smarting from their failure to qualify for the upcoming World Cup but they are dreaming of winning a fourth continental title here.

They were not intimidated by a Marrakesh crowd of 32,452 which was almost entirely dedicated to the Algerian cause, but the atmosphere is likely to be far more hostile for Wednesday's semi-final in Rabat.

"Morocco are a great side. It's not easy when you aare host country because there is a lot of pressure," Nigeria coach Eric Chelle said.

"All I hope is that it is a great game between two great teams, and that the best team wins."

On the other hand, Vladimir Petkovic accepted his side were well beaten, saying his team was at times "like a boxer taking punches while on the ground".

"Nigeria deservedly won the game. They were better than us," he added.—Agencies